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**Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)**

**Summary record of the 19th meeting**
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Tuesday, 18 November 1997, at 10 a.m.

*Chairman*: Mr. Mapuranga ..... (Zimbabwe)

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Agenda item 89: Questions relating to information *(continued)*

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.*

**Agenda item 89: Questions relating to information** *(continued)* (A/52/21, A/52/455 and Corr.1)

1. **Ms. Han** (Singapore) said that communication not only ensured the survival of civilizations, but also helped to preserve the identity and uniqueness of the many cultures around the world. The current convergence of telecommunications, computer and broadcasting technologies had an even greater impact on the way information was transmitted. As a result, the world was changing rapidly, and distance and time were shrinking, bringing about deeper knowledge of other cultures and lifestyles, while on the other hand, placing greater pressure on societies. Many countries felt powerless in the face of those problems. What was needed was not to resist change, but to adapt quickly to new ways of doing things.

2. Access to all sources of information would continue to be the key to Singapore's future. The Government had initiated development of a multimedia infrastructure project with a core broadband network that would connect several local access networks, in that way linking the entire island into a single whole. However, a network was only as effective as the applications which ran on it. In order to ensure the development of appropriate programmes, Singapore had requested the help of information technology companies. The trial of the network had begun in June 1997, and by the end of the year, the project would reach over 5,000 homes. By the end of 1998, all 800,000 households in Singapore would be able to connect to the network, in addition to schools, businesses and public areas. With the national information infrastructure in place, a society could be envisioned in which every person would be able to retrieve information by electronic means quickly, easily, safely and inexpensively, and to communicate across time and space.

3. One aspect of the communication that Singapore could not ignore was how to preserve a sense of being Singaporean. If its people lost their sense of self, they would lose their identity. In that regard, Singapore had taken a two-pronged approach to managing information. First, it had applied such preventive measures as control and censorship of materials coming in at points of mass distribution. Second, it encouraged the responsible use of mass media and information, to empower each Singaporean to distinguish right from wrong and good from undesirable.

4. Her delegation welcomed the thrust of the proposals made by the Task Force on the Reorientation of the United Nations Public Information Activities. However, before the proposed principles spelled out in its report were considered and implemented, her delegation would like to urge the United Nations to take into account the views and special needs of Member States, in order to ensure that they would continue to enjoy access to information and benefit from United Nations activities and programmes. That meant that the United Nations must continue to use the traditional media where necessary, in order to meet the needs of those countries which were technologically less advanced and to help them benefit from the development of the info-communications industry. Currently, however, the problem was not one of getting more information, but of obtaining the information that was already available at the right time. The process of communication was not complete until the information transmitted was received and understood and the intended result achieved.

5. **Mr. Semenenko** (Ukraine) said that his delegation welcomed the analytical work done by the Task Force, and strongly supported the implementation of its major conclusions. Ukraine fully supported unification of United Nations information centres with other United Nations agencies in order to achieve better coordination and effectiveness in their activities, and also to save funds through the use of common resources. Such unification, however, should take place on an individual basis and in consultation with the host Government.

6. In striving to achieve world-class standards in the field of information, his Government was constantly updating its legislative and regulatory mechanisms. In addition to laws adopted earlier, namely the Law on Print Media in Ukraine, the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, the Law on Communications and the Law on Elections of People's Deputies of Ukraine, in July 1996 the Parliament of Ukraine had adopted the laws on coverage of the activities of the organs of State power in the mass media, State support of mass media and public television and broadcasting. The main role of the State was to facilitate the activities of the mass media. Ukraine was interested in the existence of free and democratic mass media, since only thus could it achieve real accord between citizens and the State power. Only in that way could a real democratic society be established.

7. His Government considered free expression of views and respect for pluralism to be a high priority, and it was striving to upgrade the role of the mass media in a changing world. In that context, the importance of World Press Freedom Day should be emphasized and given new meaning. His delegation repeated its proposal that the United Nations should initiate the elaboration of legal instruments to protect journalists, primarily those covering situations in areas of

social tension and military conflict, and welcomed the steps taken by the Department of Public Information in that direction. It would also be helpful to have the report of the Secretary-General on cases of brutality against journalists working under such conditions.

8. **Mr. Al-Tunaiji** (United Arab Emirates) said that the significant progress in the development of information technology and communications media had made the international community better informed of the important role of free-flowing information in the development of human and economic resources and the strengthening of international cooperation. At the same time recent experience had shown that changes in the Department of Public Information (DPI) had had both positive and negative effects. Some of the measures taken by the Department had been discriminatory towards certain third world countries, and in some cases disinformation campaigns had actually been mounted against them. It was therefore essential to reiterate the importance of complying with an information code of conduct in order to secure respect for people's cultural diversity and cultural heritage and to ensure trust and openness.

9. Although the cold war was over, there was still an ever-widening gap between the world's developed and developing countries. Regrettably, information activity and the development of modern communications media had led to a situation in which the poorest countries, which did not possess modern technology, had been marginalized from the development process. It was therefore necessary to continue taking measures to establish a balanced global information system. International efforts should be intensified to promote greater possibilities for developing countries to enjoy the fruits of the "information revolution". Convinced of the vital significance of information, and taking account of its cultural values and the programme directives of its President, the United Arab Emirates had taken measures to bring its legislation relating to information into line with modern requirements while at the same time bearing in mind the country's specific social characteristics based on the fundamental laws of Islam and Arab values and traditions.

10. The experience gained in the work of DPI over the past few years had made possible a deeper appreciation of the important role played by the Department in keeping the public at large informed of the work of the United Nations in various fields, particularly that of international peace and security, and also of the development and humanitarian aid programmes carried out by the Organization in the interests of developing countries and countries afflicted by civil wars and natural disasters.

11. His delegation was convinced that the Secretary-General's measures to streamline finances and rationalize structures in order to mitigate the Organization's current budget crisis were extremely significant; however, they should not be allowed to have a negative impact on the work of the Department. The Department should be given the opportunity to implement in full its mandate to disseminate information on the basis of the provisions of General Assembly resolutions, particularly those concerning the problems of third world countries.

12. Another priority activity related to the question of Palestine, its political development and the situation of the Palestinian people, who were suffering as a result of the Israeli occupation which was adversely affecting their living conditions. Information was also required to help them realize their desire to achieve independence and live in their own country.

13. His delegation endorsed the statements by representatives of developing countries indicating the need to allocate proper resources to United Nations information centres and increase the effectiveness of their cooperation with other agencies working in the area of information. DPI should also be strengthened in order to increase the level of information available to the world public on the work of the United Nations, particularly with regard to international peace and security.

14. **Mr. Hae Jin Chun** (Republic of Korea) said that rapid progress in telecommunications, information technology, and the use of the Internet had unleashed a wave of information across the globe. Tremendous efforts were being made to use that information at both the national and international levels. His delegation was convinced that the United Nations should actively seek to harness the benefits made possible by those technological advances. The Department of Public Information in particular stood to benefit if it could optimize its use of advanced information technology. The United Nations would need to use that technology effectively if it was to mobilize and secure the public support necessary to successfully meet the challenges of the coming century.

15. Despite the United Nations's many achievements and the respect it enjoyed in many quarters, the Organization still had difficulties in ensuring that the public in some Member States fully understood and appreciated its activities. His delegation therefore shared the view that the Organization should try to disseminate information about its work more widely, and fully agreed with the recommendation contained in the Task Force's report that public information should be an integral component of the substantive programme of the

United Nations. In that context, his delegation supported the idea of establishing a new Office of Communications and Public Information. Coordination between the various United Nations departments needed to be further strengthened so that the world public could form a clear and compelling idea of the Organizations's work.

16. His delegation supported the proposed integration of the information centres into the offices of the resident coordinators, but believed that the programming of United Nations information centres in industrialized countries should take account of the widespread use of the Internet and other advanced electronic mass media, while in developing countries programming should be geared to other, more conventional media.

17. In the years to come, the physical presence of United Nations information centres would be less significant than it had been in the past, and in that regard his delegation believed that the centres, which currently constituted 38 per cent of the Department's budget and 47 per cent of its staff, could be restructured and made more efficient through the effective use of advanced information technology.

18. Bearing in mind the impressive achievements of United Nations peacekeeping operations and their outstanding contribution to international peace and security, the fiftieth anniversary of United Nations peacekeeping in 1998 would present an excellent opportunity to disseminate positive and comprehensive information about the work of the United Nations throughout the world. In planning public information activities for the year 1998, the commemoration of that anniversary should be given the highest priority. With that in mind, his Government was considering making contributions to the Organization's public information events.

19. **Ms. Durrant** (Jamaica), speaking on behalf of the member States of the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), said that the United Nations should play an important role in defining a global approach to information and information technology. The far-reaching programmes incorporating the most modern aspects of information technology in the work of the United Nations had greatly benefited the Organization and Member States collectively. The United Nations was already connected electronically to all permanent missions in New York, and delegations could access many documents within hours of preparation; video conferences were being held and electronic mail services were operating, all of which was testimony to the advances made by the United Nations in that critical area.

20. While the CARICOM member States recognized and strongly supported the Organization's initiatives in the area of information technology, they remained committed to expanding the use of traditional mass media. Radio remained one of the most powerful and effective media, especially in developing countries. In that context, the CARICOM member States strongly supported the work of United Nations Radio in general and its Caribbean Unit in particular. They urged DPI to take the necessary measures to implement the decision of the General Assembly contained in resolution 38/82 B regarding the introduction of full programming in French/Creole at the Caribbean Unit.

21. The radio, television and print media were vital mechanisms for the dissemination of information. The CARICOM member States urged the United Nations to continue to recognize the significant role that those media must play in the field of global communications. They noted with satisfaction that the United Nations had established collaborative arrangements with the media and had maintained a wide-ranging publications programme on issues of relevance to the Organization and communities throughout the world. They urged the Department of Public Information to continue to explore ways and means of fostering greater cooperation with media organizations and a better understanding of the United Nations through effective communication programmes and strategies.

22. The role of the United Nations information centres in the Organization's ongoing information strategy must be preserved. The CARICOM member States had taken careful note of the review of United Nations publications undertaken by the Joint Inspection Unit. Many of the observations and recommendations in that report were useful and should be borne in mind.

23. The Community had taken careful note of the report by the Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities. It was hoped that the renewed public information programme would be consistent with the mandates given by Member States and that the Committee on Information would be able to play a constructive role in that process. The Community noted that, in the document dealing with the budgetary implications of the Secretary-General's reform, some 63 posts were to be cut in the Department of Public Information. The CARICOM member States hoped that those cuts would not affect the United Nations capacity to carry out its mandates and would carefully follow those actions in the appropriate body.

24. **Mr. Doudech** (Tunisia) said that the reform of the Department of Public Information, which had been at the centre of attention at the previous session of the Committee

on Information, continued to evoke interest on the part of delegations after the submission of the relevant report by the Task Force. Any reform affecting United Nations information activities must take into account the needs of the international community. Those needs were connected not only with conveying a more favourable image of the Organization to world public opinion, but also required the strengthening of activities aimed at publicizing the Organization's ideals, action plans and the conventions adopted under its auspices as well as informing the international community about the various dangers threatening mankind and the measures necessary to avert them.

25. He stressed that the task of defining priorities in that area must be carried out by Member States on the basis of consultations and cooperation. In that connection, the view that the financial crisis affecting the Organization did not permit it to meet those needs could not serve to justify changes in programmes already adopted by Member States.

26. A bold reform of the Department of Public Information must be in keeping with the needs of the Organization's restructuring and enable it to carry out its tasks properly as a world forum entrusted with various mandates in numerous fields. Amid increasing globalization, information played a strategic role in the formulation of a long-term and pragmatic view of the problems that would have to be dealt with in the coming century. As the Secretary-General had underscored, the communication function must be at the very centre of the Organization's strategic management.

27. The entire reform plan was imbued with the view that the Organization should be more accessible for the world at large and more attentive to mankind's needs and aspirations and should enlighten the world about common interests. In that regard, the Organization's main work should be oriented towards achieving the desired effect. As Mr. Sanbar pointed out in his statement, the value of information was not in what was said, but in what was understood.

28. The use of new communication technology, undoubtedly, was significantly promoting the effective dissemination of information and efforts to reach the widest possible audience. At the same time, such technology was not equally accessible for all countries in the world, which impeded the broadest possible use of the benefits resulting from information. In that regard, he stressed the need to underscore the importance of international cooperation in order to enhance the potential of developing countries in the field of communications. That question should be given particular attention in view of the decisive importance of information in promoting development.

29. The foregoing issues and other questions were to have been discussed by the Committee on Information at its last session. Nevertheless, the fact that the Committee had been unable to put forward concrete recommendations on the work of the Department of Public Information should not be interpreted as an indication of any inability on its part to help improve the Organization's operations in the field of communications. Tunisia hoped that the Committee on Information would be able to overcome the difficulties that it had recently encountered.

30. **Ms. Chomiak-Salvi** (United States of America) said that her country supported the Secretary-General's efforts at reforming the United Nations, including giving a central role to public information. An active information programme must be an integral part of the strategic management of a reformed United Nations. In order to meet those information needs, however, it was necessary to have an efficient and effective Department of Public Information.

31. The Committee on Information had worked under extraordinary circumstances, having had to adjust its schedule of meetings to the overall reform process. Her delegation was particularly satisfied that the Committee had completed its work in a spirit of consensus.

32. **Mr. Tourgeman** (Israel) said that the right of people to know was a basic human right. It could be exercized only through a free flow of information in all fields. Freedom of information manifested itself first of all in complete freedom to express views and publish them in writing. A fully democratic regime ensuring political pluralism and respecting the rights of all citizens was a prerequisite for freedom of information. The free flow of information included the right and the freedom to criticize various public phenomena and shortcomings in the domestic and foreign policies of Governments. When the authorities prohibited the publication of material that did not correspond to their policies, there was no freedom of information and no freedom of opinion and expression. Nevertheless, even in democratic societies, whoever believed in freedom of expression and information had to be courageous enough to say and write things which ran counter to the views of the majority of his colleagues.

*The meeting rose at 11.15 a.m.*